

# LIVING WITH HISTORY IN NEW ORLEANS' NEIGHBORHOODS

## Holy Cross



PHOTO: TOLTON CONNER JR.

PRESERVATION RESOURCE CENTER OF NEW ORLEANS INVITES YOU TO EXPLORE THE LOCAL SIDE OF LIFE IN HOLY CROSS, WHERE THE RURAL FEEL, HIGH GROUND ALONG THE RIVER, AFFORDABLE HOMES, AND REMARKABLE SENSE OF COMMUNITY DRAW NEW RESIDENTS.



The Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, or Industrial Canal, is a narrow boundary, but it effectively separates urban Bywater from the relatively rural and settled Holy Cross Historic District. The cottages tucked alongside Sister Street near the canal levee sit on ample lots with modest rambling gardens. Many front porches have pets lolling about or children playing on them. Homes here tend to be owned, not rented, and it's not unusual to find resident families going back three generations. A walk on the levee provides breathtaking views of New Orleans' downtown and the curve of the river. The same walk brings you past a quick succession of New Orleans' most famous buildings, including the "Steamboat Gothic" houses and the Holy Cross School, which gives the area its name.

The Holy Cross neighborhood sits on high ground near the river that was once part of several riverfront plantations. Bernard Marigny subdivided his considerable holdings here into Faubourg LaCourse around 1808. German and Irish immigrants and African Americans settled the region in sufficient numbers to call for the establishment of Catholic St. Maurice Parish. By 1900 what is now the Holy Cross neighborhood featured a number of small farms that provided produce, poultry and dairy products to New Orleans markets. Although Holy Cross itself is fairly high, the surrounding area was swampy until drainage improvements made in the 1910s helped dry out the land beyond St. Claude Avenue. During the same period, improved transportation made the neighborhood less remote from downtown New Orleans. The Industrial Canal (1923) established a



new term, the “Lower Ninth Ward,” for the district downriver of the canal. The desegregation of the school system, which began in 1960, prompted many white residents to leave Holy Cross and other urban neighborhoods. In 1965 Hurricane Betsy caused massive flooding and killed 70 people in the Ninth Ward, a disaster that prompted Holy Cross residents of all races to move elsewhere.

By the 1970s, Holy Cross was a stable mixed neighborhood with about 60% African-American residents. New residents are drawn to Holy Cross by its affordable

historic housing stock and its remarkable sense of community. Residents stress that it’s not a “hoity toity” place, but rather a neighborhood where people work for a living. “It’s just a regular Joe kind of lovely historic district,” says Holy Cross resident Pam Dashiell.



Since the mid-1990s, Preservation Resource Center’s Rebuilding Together program has partnered with Holy Cross Neighborhood Association to fix up, paint and repair more than ninety neighborhood homes.

The best statement of present-day Holy Cross is the Delery Street Riverfront Playground, which residents built for themselves in an all-out volunteer effort in 1996. Hundreds of volunteers gathered materials, drew plans, engineered angles, and built one of the finest playgrounds in the city. Only steps away from the levee, it’s a safe place for the kids of Holy Cross to cut up—with plenty of neighbors to watch for their safety.

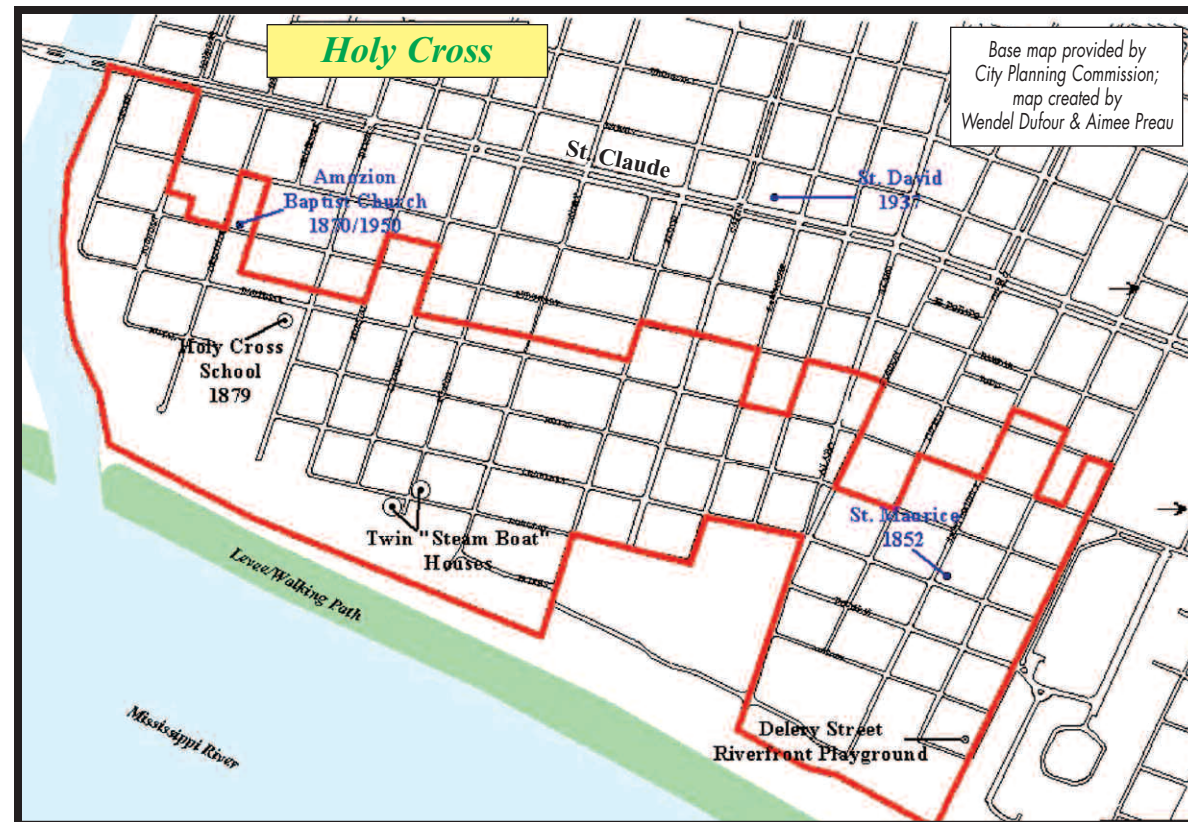
## WALKING TOUR

**We encourage you to use good judgment and common sense in taking this tour.**

### Sister Street and Mississippi River Levee (walk)

Sister Street is named in honor of the Ursuline Nuns, who built a convent near here in 1826 and remained until 1912. Climbing to the top of the levee at the Industrial Canal, you’ll gain a view of the spacious lots and porches that lend the typical shotgun cottages of this neighborhood the feel of small farmhouses. The canal with its lock, constructed 1916-1923, was world-class engineering and the first reinforced concrete continuous-pour in the United States.

However, it was a source of bitter feelings in the neighborhood. Elder residents recall being told to leave their homes on five days’ notice, with scant compensation, to make way for the canal and the rollback of the levees. Today, well-organized and informed residents oppose plans by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to replace the St. Claude Ave. Bridge and the existing locks on the canal. The Saint Claude Bridge, tied into the lock foundation, opens in tandem with the lock to avoid ships running into either structure. It was designed by Joseph Strauss, who also designed the George Washington and Golden Gate bridges. The Louisiana Preservation Alliance placed this bridge on its Ten Most Endangered Structures List in 2002. Look past the U.S. Naval Support Center on the other side of the canal to catch a sweeping view of the river turning around Algiers Point and the skyline of downtown New Orleans. This stretch is considered one of the most congested and dangerous of the entire river, as close-packed ships, freighters, and barges speed up to make the sharp turn. Walk left down the levee. This is a great walk with a dog; often you’ll hear the calliope of a steamboat along the river. Two blocks along, on your left, you’ll spy the 1895 administration building of Holy Cross School, 4950 Dauphine St. The Holy Cross brothers located here in 1871. The school became St. Isidore’s College in 1879; today it is a day school for middle and high school boys. Walk down to explore the campus, or continue three blocks to the levee and discover the delightful pair of “Steamboat Gothic” houses edging Egania Street. The house closer to the levee, built in 1905 by



Captain Milton Doullut and his wife who were both riverboat captains, was moved in 1912 when the levee was raised. The couple’s son, Paul, built the second house in 1912. Both houses are on the National Register. You’ll pass the Andry Street Wharf, followed by the modern Alabo Street Wharf, a working dock where you’ll see steel, copper and lead stacked for shipment. The levee jogs and continues one block on blacktop. The St. Maurice Street Wharf, which follows, is mostly dormant now. Within sight—on the left as you move on—is the Delery Street Riverfront Playground and Alhambra Street. The park is on the former site of the Jahncke Shipyard.

Continuing beyond Holy Cross Historic District, you’ll find the footbridge ahead is blocked off for motor vehicles but is accessible to walkers. It leads along the front of Jackson Barracks, one of America’s finest specimens of antebellum Federal architecture. This is the home of the Louisiana National Guard and its commanding general. It is also the spot where “vampire” Brad Pitt was filmed arriving in New Orleans in the

movie *Interview with A Vampire*. Beyond the barracks lie the St. Bernard Parish line and the old Arabi community. From here you can see downriver to the Domino Sugar Refinery. Just beyond this building is the battlefield where General Jackson and Jean LaFitte defeated the British in 1815.





*Holy Cross School*

- 1835 Latest date for construction of Jackson Barracks
- 1857 St. Maurice Parish church built
- 1871 Brothers of the Holy Cross move to St. Isidore's Farm, present location of Holy Cross School
- 1879 Holy Cross School established
- 1912 Levee along present Holy Cross district raised; Ursulines relocate convent from Holy Cross to Uptown New Orleans
- 1923 Industrial Canal completed; many Holy Cross residents displaced; levees rolled back
- 1960 McDonogh 19, one of two city public schools to be racially integrated causing riots, draws worldwide media attention
- 1961 Flood covers 80% of the Lower 9th Ward with 6 feet of water
- 1965 Hurricane Betsy submerges most of the Lower 9th Ward outside of Holy Cross; widespread destruction
- 1981 Holy Cross Neighborhood Association established
- 1986 Holy Cross becomes National Register Historic District
- 1996 Delery Street Riverfront Playground built by neighborhood volunteers

## Annual Neighborhood Events

- Spring: Playground Easter egg hunt
- August: Delery Street Playground "Kids with Character" celebration
- September: Commemoration of Hurricane Betsy
- October: Ninth Ward Festival
- October: Preservation Resource Center's Rebuilding Together
- December: Holiday caroling

## Neighborhood Organizations

- Holy Cross Neighborhood Association
- Delery Street Riverfront Playground Booster Club

## Holy Cross School

*A college preparatory middle and high school for boys*



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*An anchor in the  
Holy Cross Neighborhood since 1879*



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*Since 1974 the Preservation Resource Center has promoted the preservation, restoration and revitalization of New Orleans' historic neighborhoods and architecture.*



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